'THE FOURTH DIMENSION' TIME IN ENGLISH IDIOMS

ZOLTÁN Ildikó Gy.[1]

Abstract

Time is 'the indefinite continuous progress of existence and events in the past, present and future regarded as a whole'. It has fascinated and puzzled people from the dawn of our consciousness and still presents a mystery to scientific, philosophical and religious thinkers alike. The presence of its effects is undeniable and our awareness of it is evident both in our way of thinking and in its linguistic expression: idioms. The present paper is not an attempt to exhaustively list all the English idioms that contain references to time, but to present the probable or possible origin of a few more interesting or intriguing 'specimens'.

Keywords: time, period, idiom, word, origin

The word *time* comes from the same root as the Middle English *tide*, the Anglo-Saxon and Swedish *tíd*, time, hour, season or the German *Zeit*. Literally it meant an allotted time, appointed season. It is little wonder that these two words have been combined in the saying *'**time** and **tide** wait for no man'*, which succinctly coveys the experience that the British, as traditionally sea-faring people, must have gathered in a most practical and hands-on manner about the inexorable nature of both.

There are several different possibilities to formulate a definition for time, from the physical through the philosophical and religious to the bio-psychological, even dictionary entries can differ on the subject both in complexity and length. One of the simplest formulations is that *time* is a dimension in which events can be ordered from the past through the present into the future and also the measure of durations of events and the intervals between them. The units of time that govern our daily lives are based on periodic events and motions like the apparent movement of the sun across the sky, the change of the seasons, the phases of the moon and so on. Most significantly, time has a personal value, since we are often painfully aware of the limited time in each day and, possibly even more so, in the human existence.

TIME

In everyday reference, as most languages will demonstrate, time is 'a versatile performer' (Franklin P. Jones). It passes, goes by, flies or drags, runs out, is on your side or no longer our friend, heals all wounds, can be killed, lost or made, taken by the forelock and will tell.

[1] Assistant, „Petru Maior" University of Târgu-Mureş

BDD-A2936 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.14.83 (2026-09-05 12:04:07 UTC)

The above cited expression, ***time*** *and* ***tide*** *wait for no man* means that the natural progress of time will continue without regard to man, so one must take advantage of chances offered. It is one of the numerous sayings that emphasise the folly of putting off or delaying things that require immediate attention, like "Procrastination is the thief of time", a quote from Edward Young's poem *'Night Thoughts'* (1742) which has gained the status of proverb. Today the expression is often used simply to hurry somebody or as one gets ready to leave.

When something dates from very far back, it has been there *from* ***time*** *immemorial* or since ***time*** *out of mind*. No immediate tasks or obligations leave you with ***time*** *on your hands* or ***time*** *to kill*. If you are thoroughly enjoying yourself, you *have a good* ***time****, a great* ***time****, the* ***time*** *of your life, a hell of a* ***time*** – probably engaged in somewhat more reckless activities, and you don't need to be particularly environmental-minded *to have a whale of a* ***time***. When somebody mentions *the sands of* ***time***, the hourglass comes to mind, strongly suggesting the passage of time, but you should never give up, *there's no* ***time*** *like the present* to *take* ***time*** *by the forelock* and seize the opportunity that presents itself then and there. If you just *bide your* ***time*** waiting quietly for the right moment, for a suitable chance, you might end up doing thing *in the nick of* ***time***, just before it is too late or just before something bad happens.

UNITS OF TIME

(Not to have) a ***moment/ second / minute*** *to call one's own* means to (lack) any time in which to do as one wishes: time when one can be alone, not working, etc.

The ***moment*** *of truth* refers to a crisis; a severe test; a turning-point when a decision has to be made or a emergency handled, revealing the true qualities of a person or thing. It is an allusion to the Spanish 'el momento de la verdad' – the final sword-thrust in a bullfight, when the matador approaches the bull for the last time to kill it – certainly a critical moment for both the bull and the bullfighter. It was Ernest Hemingway who explained the origin of the phrase in his novel about bullfighting, *'Death in the Afternoon'* (1932), and made it popular in the English-speaking world.

Isaac Watts advises you in his *'Divine Songs for Children'* 20 (1715): Against Idleness and Mischief to *improve each shining* ***hour***, making the best possible use of your waking hours (by working hard):

> How doth the little busy bee
> Improve each shining hour
> And gather honey all the day
> From every opening flower!

The time of one's greatest success is *one's finest* ***hour.*** The expression was used by Winston Churchill in his speech made to the House of Commons on 18 June 1940, after

BDD-A2936 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.14.83 (2026-09-05 12:04:07 UTC)

France had sought an armistice with Germany on 16 June, and just over a month after he took over as Prime Minister of the U.K. at the head of the Coalition government:
"... the Battle of France is over. I expect that the Battle of Britain is about to begin. (...)Hitler knows that he will have to break us in this island or lose the war. If we can stand up to him, all Europe may be freed and the life of the world may move forward into broad, sunlit uplands.
But if we fail, then the whole world (...) will sink into the abyss of a new dark age (...). Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that, if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, 'This was their finest hour'."

The time of naïve, inexperienced and immature youth is referred to as one's *salad* ***days***. The phrase is from Shakespeare's *'Antony and Cleopatra'* (Act 1, scene v), where she speaks about "My salad days, / When I was green in judgement:– cold in blood,/ To say as I said then!"

The colour green can be an allusion to the lettuce leaves often used in preparing salads, or more likely to the bright, fresh shoots of young spring foliage, or even the colour of most fruit when still unripe. Like in the simile *as green as grass*, the colour green is often connected with lack of experience of the world or of life, usually because of one's tender age. Perhaps the most famous use of the metaphor was by another queen in 1977: Elisabeth II said in her speech at the Guildhall on her Silver Jubilee, referring to the pledge she took at twenty-one to serve her people: "Although that vow was made in my salad days, when I was green in judgement, I do not regret nor retract one word of it."

Halcyon ***days*** are times remembered as being idyllically happy, contented, peaceful, prosperous or perfect. The word for the fabled bird 'halcyon' derives from the Greek for kingfisher, *alkuōn*, compounded of *háls* (the sea) and *kúōn* (to conceive or brood on). The ancient Greeks (Sicilians) believed that these birds built nests that floated on the surface of the sea, laid their eggs and incubated during the 14-day period of calm and fair weather, *alkuonídes emérai*, or kingfisher days, the 7 days before and 7 days after the winter solstice (the 21st of December), in waters that were always unruffled and peaceful.

The original Alcyone, or Halkyiónē, was a goddess of Greek mythology, daughter of Aeolus, the ruler of the winds. When her husband Ceyx died in a shipwreck during a terrible storm at sea, she was so overcome with grief that she threw herself into the sea. Seeing her devotion, the gods were moved to compassion and brought both of them back to life, metamorphosed into kingfishers. Alcyone built her nest on the sea every year and her father restrained the gales and calmed the waves so that she could lay her eggs and brood safely.

The hottest days of the year, or days of sweltering heat can be called *dog* ***days***. This period of the year on the northern hemisphere is usually in July and the first half of August, due to the particular angle at which the earth tilts towards the Sun. The Romans considered the hottest week of the summer the one between the 3rd and 11th of July and called it *caniculares* ***dies*** or *dog* ***days***. According to their theory, since the Dog-star, Sirius,

BDD-A2936 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.14.83 (2026-09-05 12:04:07 UTC)

rises and sets with the Sun during this period and shines so brightly, it must be its added heat that makes the weather so oppressively hot in this interval of time.

A *red letter* ***day*** has come to mean a day of special significance; a day looked forward to or remembered with delight as being particularly pleasant, happy, important, fortunate or rewarding.

The tradition of writing out and later printing all important feast days and saints' days in red ink on almanacs and ecclesiastical calendars goes back to medieval times: thus they were distinguished from all the other days of the year, which were in black. Since these were days for rejoicing and celebration, in time people have begun to use the term to refer to days of personal significance.

In the Church of England the term denotes those festivals for which the Book of Common Prayer includes a collect, epistle and gospel for that day.

Those young and those young in spirit are encouraged to *seize the* ***day,*** make the most of the present moment, enjoy themselves while they have the chance, "Dum vivimus, vivamus". Horace says in his *'Odes'* (I, xi, 8): "Carpe diem quam minimum credula postere", advice which appears in Connington's translation from 1863 as "Seize the present, trust tomorrow e'en as little as you may."

Another expression with a very similar meaning would be *gather ye rosebuds while ye may,* take advantage of your opportunities; live for the present. The thought has been put by various writers in various ways for a long time. One version is in the *Apocrypha*, in The Wisdom of Solomon (2:8) "Let us crown ourselves with rosebuds, before they are withered." Also, in a poem by Robert Herrick from 1648 we find:

> Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,
> Old Time is still a-flying,
> And this same flower that smiles today
> Tomorrow will be dying.

The fleeting nature of human fascination is mirrored in the expression applied to things, events, or persons that attract great initial interest or cause excitement for a short time and then are soon forgotten: *a nine* ***days'*** *wonder*. In Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* (1380) the saying is: *A wonder last but nyne night*. The expression, however, predates this work by over half a century.

As mad as a ***March*** *hare* is a suggestive description of someone zany, eccentric, demented; behaving in a strange, silly or irresponsible way. Both the White Rabbit and the Mad Hatter are memorable characters in Lewis Carroll's *'Alice's Adventures in Wonderland'*, but the expressions based on these similes are much older. Hares have been considered mad since Chaucer's time. They can be seen leaping about wildly during their breeding season and the courtship includes not only the pursuit of the females by the males, but also a brief boxing match before mating. The idiom might suggest that in March they behave in a more unpredictable and playful way than at any other time of the year, but in

BDD-A2936 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.14.83 (2026-09-05 12:04:07 UTC)

fact the rutting period is longer than this particular month. This is probably why some authorities consider that *March hare* is an alteration or corruption of '*marsh hare'*, hares that are reputed to behave oddly either because of the damp surroundings in which they live or – according to one of Erasmus's *'Aphorisms'* (1542) – because "hares are wilder in marshes from the absence of hedges and cover."

If the question 'When?' is answered with *(not in a)* ***month of Sundays***, it is a perhaps not so pleasant or humorous way of saying (not for) a very long, seemingly endless period of time. It would actually be approximately 30 weeks, about seven and a half months, but it is unlikely that anyone using the expression has such a precise period in mind. At one time the thought was phrased as '*a* ***week*** *of Sundays'*, but that apparently did not sound like quite enough, so the present variant took over by the beginning of the nineteenth century.

The expression is most probably an allusion to Sundays traditionally passing slowly because of religious restrictions on activity or entertainment, since the biblical command to labour for six days and rest on the Sabbath was taken more seriously in the days when the saying was originally coined.

You will fare no better if the period is defined as (not) *for donkey's* ***years***. The only difference is that this phrase can be traced back to a pun alluding to the length of a donkey's ears and playing on the pronunciation (formerly considered uneducated) of 'years' as 'ears'. A further ingredient is the fact that a donkey can live to a great age.

The silly ***season*** is the time of year, usually during the hot summer months or during a holiday period, when journalists have to fill space reporting on exaggerated news stories, frivolous events and activities, or pull other outlandish publicity stunts.

Originally it referred to the months of August and September when Parliament and the Law Courts are in recess. During the rest of the year nineteenth century newspapers were busy informing the population about political debate and decision, reporting political rows, leaks to the press, errors of judgement or interference in the affairs of other countries. But in high summer, when Parliament rose and London was deserted by the wealthy and important, through lack of serious news the desperate journalists had to fill their columns with trivial items such as news of giant gooseberries, sightings of sea serpents in Loch Ness and long correspondence on subjects of little or no real interest. These days the silly season still comes around every year, but since the reading public is already used to a constant abundance of trivia all through the year, it is barely noticeable.

PARTS OF THE DAY

Just like the earliest hours of the day bring the gradual transition from the darkness of the night to the bright light of day even before sunrise, the slightly ironical *came the* ***dawn*** suggest the transition – whether gradual or sudden – from incomprehension or ignorance to realisation and understanding: when something ***dawns*** *on* you. *A false* ***dawn***, on the other hand, is a misleadingly hopeful sign, like the transient zodiacal light in the sky which precedes the true dawn by about an hour, especially in eastern countries.

BDD-A2936 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.14.83 (2026-09-05 12:04:07 UTC)

A *Monday* ***morning*** *quarterback* is a suitable description for a person who is wise after the event; and expert after the fact using hindsight to assess situations and specify alternative solutions.

The term could refer to a quarterback in American football, i.e. the player stationed behind the centre who is supposed to direct the team's attacking play. This enables him to analyse and criticise the game retrospectively, without having taken an active part in it. However, the inspiration might just as well have been any sportswriter who poses in the Monday paper as an expert on how the strategy of the game could have been improved – using to his advantage the fact that most football games are played on weekends.

Another phrase that can be applied to a certain kind of people is *fly-by-****night***. This person would then be someone undependable, a dubious character; one who sets up a business operation, makes some money and departs abruptly defrauding his creditors. It is also used in reference to an organisation dishonestly established in a place for only a short time and disappearing as suddenly as it appeared.

In 1796 Francis Grose defined the expression in *'A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue'* as 'an ancient form of reproach to an old woman signifying that she is a witch.' The meaning has broadened since – today it refers to anybody fleeing or running away hastily and surreptitiously, usually under the cover of darkness, from a recent activity, especially while still owing money.

Dark times and even darker deeds are evoked by the ***night*** *of the long knives*: a ruthless or decisive act of great disloyalty, especially when several people meet together to arrange the dismissal of a mutual friend from high office.

Originally it meant a treacherous massacre, like that of native British chieftains by Hengist's Anglo-Saxon mercenaries in 472 on Salisbury Plain. According to legend and tradition, after the Romans withdrew from Britain, Vortigern became the high king of the Britons. He allowed the Saxon tribes lead by Hengist and Horsa to settle originally on the Isle of Thanet, later in all of Kent, in exchange for their help in fending off the invasions of Picts and Scots. The story recorded in the *Historia Brittonum* says that the Saxons called a 'false Council', ostensibly to seal the friendship and peace between the Britons and the Saxons, which all participants were supposed to attend without arms. Hengist, however, ordered all his men to hide their knives in their shoes. As they sat 'man beside man', Saxon beside Briton, at a word of command from Hengist the former drew their knives and killed the unarmed Britons sitting next to them: three hundred elders of King Vortigern. He himself was spared but had to cede more territories to the Saxons in ransom for his life. The event became known in Welsh as *Brady y Cyllyll Hirion*, The Treachery of the Long Knives, a symbol of Saxon perfidy.

In more recent history the phrase was applied to the night of 30 June 1934 when Hitler, with the help of the SS and the Gestapo, had a number of political murders and arrests carried out. The purge was set up to eliminate Hitler's possible rivals, opponents and any influential critics of his regime. The phrase occurs in a Nazi marching song, and

BDD-A2936 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.14.83 (2026-09-05 12:04:07 UTC)

in history it is also referred to as 'Operation Hummingbird' or the 'so-called Röhm-Putsch' in German.

In British politics, the term is used for the major Cabinet reshuffle effected by Prime Minister Harold Macmillan on 13 July 1962, dismissing one third of his Cabinet. The dramatic change was intended to regain Conservative popularity in Britain, but was precipitated by a leak to the press and brought sharp criticism from Macmillan's political opponents.

MISCELLANEOUS

(In) the doldrums describes a period or condition of depression, slackness, stagnation; when or where nothing important, new or encouraging happens. 'Doldrum' has its origin in the Old English word for 'dull', *dol*, or the obsolete *dold* for stupid, combined with the noun suffix *-rum*, the same as in 'tantrum', for example. It was a slang expression, used in the plural as a rule, meaning a period of dullness and inactivity. It came to be applied by sailors to regions where ships were likely to be becalmed, especially those parts north of the Equator where the north-east and south-east trade winds come together and cancel each other out in the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. In the days of sailing-ships, this belt understandably gained notoriety for its calms and light baffling winds (occasionally interrupted by sudden squalls and storms), since navigation was impossible under such conditions and the ships often remained motionless for days.

The life on sailing ships is the origin of *to/until the bitter end*, persevering to the very last, whatever the outcome, enduring an affliction or adversity throughout its course, until death or ultimate defeat. The etymology of the phrase is uncertain, but it is most likely associated with the nautical term 'bitter', meaning the last part of a cable inboard of the bitts. The anchor ropes and cables (mooring lines) on early sailing ships were fastened to and wound round pairs of stout posts, strong bollards called the bitts, on the deck to prevent the cable being lost overboard. The parts of the ropes nearest to the bitts were the 'bitter ends', as Capt. Smith tells us in his *'Seaman's Grammar'* from 1627: "A Bitter is but the turne of a Cable about the bitts, and veare it out by little and little. And the Bitters end is that part of the Cable doth stay within boord." If the rope were unwound or let out to the bitter end, to its final part, a ship would be much more likely to suffer shipwreck or other calamity, thus the grim meaning.

Another explanation is that the expression may have been influenced by the biblical sentence 'But her end is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword' from the Book of Proverbs (5:4).

From among the numerous expressions referring to frequency and periods of time, *once in a blue moon* has undergone the most significant change. In 1526 we find it in a verse by William Barlowe (Bishop of Chichester): *"Yf they saye the mone is blewe,/ We must believe that it is true."*

During the same period, there was a proverb in use with the same meaning but which held the moon to be made of green cheese: *"They would make men believe … that the moon is*

BDD-A2936 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.14.83 (2026-09-05 12:04:07 UTC)

made of green cheese." (Richard Brightwell, alias John Frith, 1529). Blue or green, it was absurd – and the original meaning was 'never'.

Occasionally, however, the moon does appear to have a slight tinge of blue on a clear night, especially the part that is faintly visible when the bright part is in the shape of a fingernail. A faint blue cast can also occur owing to certain unusual atmospheric conditions, or when an event such as the eruption of a volcano occurs (like that of the Krakatoa in 1883) and dust particles fill the sky. Since a number of such instances have been recorded over recent centuries, a change has come about: the meaning became 'hardly ever'.

In the USA there has been another development. The expression first appeared in the *'Maine Farmers' Almanach'* of 1937, but then through a misunderstanding came to mean a month in which there were two full moons. On average, there will be 41 months that have two full moons in every century. By that calculation the phrase means once every two-and-a-half years: 'rarely'.

Many clever and famous people have said and written witty or humorous things about time. By way of winding up, let me quote two of my personal favourites. One is by Einstein: 'Time is what a clock measures.' The other has become widely known and cited as graffiti, but is in fact from Henri Bergson: 'Time keeps everything from happening all at once.'

Bibliography

Flavell, Linda and Roger 2002, *Dictionary of Idioms and their Origins*, London: Kyle Cathie Ltd.

Manser, Martin 1990, *Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins*, London: Sphere Books Ltd.

Seidl, Jennifer and W. McMordie 1988, *English Idioms*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

The COBUILD Dictionary of Idioms 1995, London: Harper Collins Publishers

The Longman Dictionary of English Idioms 1979, Longman Group UK Limited

The Oxford Dictionary of Idioms 1999, New York: Oxford University Press Inc.

The Wordsworth Dictionary of Idioms 1993, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd.

The Wordsworth Dictionary of Phrase & Fable 1993, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd.

dictionary.reference.com

http://en.wikipedia.org

BDD-A2936 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.14.83 (2026-09-05 12:04:07 UTC)